

Ready for Success in Kindergarten: Perspectives of Teachers, Parents, and Administrators in Hawai'i

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In recent years researchers have drawn attention to the importance of identifying beliefs about readiness within local contexts, noting that the concept of readiness is a relative term that is socially and culturally constructed within particular communities and that understandings about readiness may vary from setting to setting (Skinner, Bryant, Coffman, & Campbell, 1998). Beliefs about readiness may also vary systematically with local community, school, and family readiness resources. When family and school resources are limited it may be necessary to compensate for them (Piotrkowski, Botsko, & Matthews, 2001). Thus, in communities where schools are low performing and underfunded, families may feel that their children need to be better prepared for kindergarten than parents who send their children to schools in more affluent areas. Similarly, kindergarten teachers in high-poverty communities may need to place a stronger emphasis on teaching skills that students may not be learning at home, unlike teachers in middle and upper class communities who feel that the home environment will compensate for areas in which a child may be weak.

In addition to defining readiness as multifaceted, and shaped by the local context, the readiness literature also underscores a growing recognition that it is not enough for children simply to be ready for school. Schools and communities must also be ready for children if they are to become successful learners. The National Education Goals Panel proposed ten characteristics of ready schools, including smooth transitions between home and school; continuity between child care and early education programs and elementary schools; and curriculum and instruction that helps young children learn about and make sense of their complex world and achieve school success (Halle, Zaff, Calkins, & Margie, 2000).

The early grades are a time when schools can have a major impact on students' learning and development. Therefore, as set forth in the National Association for the Education of Young Children's position statement on school readiness (NAEYC, 1990), it is the responsibility of schools to meet the needs of children as they enter kindergarten. Furthermore, any discussion and decision-making regarding readiness

must take into consideration the diversity and inequity of children's early life experiences and the wide range of variation in young children's development and learning.

According to Pianta & Walsh (1996), readiness "cannot be reduced to getting children ready for school or getting schools ready for children...Rather the answer lies in where and how children (and families) and schooling come together in a relationship, and in the quality of that relationship" (p. 4). It is important, therefore, not only to identify beliefs about readiness at the local level, but also to frame readiness as an interaction among children, families, schools, and communities.

The Hawai'i context

In 2000, state agencies and foundations in Hawai'i were poised to support readiness efforts to improve educational outcomes for children. There was, however, a lack of shared understanding of the construct of readiness to guide these efforts. Parents, teachers, and school administrators all play a critical role in the education of young children. The extent to which these groups share common beliefs about what is involved in children being ready for school and schools being ready for children is important to improving educational outcomes. In response to the demand for data regarding the local Hawai'i context, the study, *Ready for Success in Kindergarten: Perspectives of Teachers, Parents, and Administrators in Hawaii* was designed and implemented by Donna Grace and Stephanie Feeney, faculty members in the College of Education at the University of Hawai'i, and Betsy Brandt, an evaluation specialist in the DOE and adjunct faculty in the College of Education. We embarked on the project because of our interest in child development, early childhood education, and child assessment, and our desire to find ways to approach readiness in Hawai'i schools that would improve the experiences of children entering kindergarten. The purpose of the study was to (a) discover the perceptions and beliefs held by Hawai'i parents, teachers, and administrators about children's readiness for school and schools' readiness for children, and (b) to compare these views with the findings of national survey studies and other research reported in the literature. The results of this research provided a foundation

for the development of a statewide definition of readiness, and for systems-level assessment tools that reflected the beliefs and values of parents, teachers, administrators, and other professionals who work with four- and five-year-old children in Hawai'i.

The Study

The majority of previous studies of readiness have relied solely on survey data, however our project consisted of two major studies—one primarily qualitative and the other quantitative. Data were gathered from 24 focus group interviews conducted across the state and 2,604 returned surveys. In the focus groups, the participants' own items and categories were allowed to emerge. Given the diverse, multi-cultural community in Hawai'i, and our objective of gathering parents' and teachers' perceptions of readiness, we felt that it was important that the participants freely express their own ways of seeing and organizing the construct of readiness.

We gathered group responses to three open-ended sets of questions, two of which are reported here. The first set used a participant voting procedure to generate child readiness items (skills and abilities important to kindergarten success); the categories that make up the construct (for example, social-emotional development, physical health and well being, cognitive development, general knowledge, etc.); and the characteristics that identify essential aspects of readiness (those skills and abilities considered most important to kindergarten success). The second set asked for ways that various groups involved with young children can support readiness in children, first, by generating school policies and practices that support success in kindergarten, and second, by finding ways that teachers and schools can build on the cultural backgrounds of children and enhance their cultural awareness and sensitivity.

The second study used a written survey in order to compare and contrast views held by parents, teachers, and administrators in Hawai'i with those reported in national studies conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) for the U.S. Department of Education. The second purpose of the survey was to have greater representation of views about school readiness than was possible with our group interview qualitative methodology. The first section of this study included twenty-five child readiness items, fifteen of which came from the national Kindergarten Teacher Survey (National Center for Educational Statistics, 1993b). The second section contained eighteen items dealing

with school practices and policies that support children's success in kindergarten.

Analysis of the qualitative and quantitative data helped us to develop a set of child readiness domains and to organize and group the child readiness characteristics. The development of the domains facilitated the process of comparing and contrasting group responses and allowed us to discuss findings in ways that were meaningful and useful. The domains are as follows:

- ❖ Social-Emotional Development
- ❖ School-Related Behaviors and Skills
- ❖ Approaches to Learning
- ❖ Language Development and Communication
- ❖ Cognitive Development and General Knowledge
- ❖ Motor Development and Self-Help Skills
- ❖ Physical Health and Well-Being

Results

When the survey and interview results are taken together, agreement on how the concept of child readiness is viewed and organized is remarkable across the role groups and school types, and coincides quite well with several of the academic domains such as social-emotional skills, general knowledge, and school-related behaviors. The findings from both studies indicate that the child readiness characteristics judged as most important to kindergarten success in Hawai'i come from the following domains (listed also are the top child readiness items within the domains):

- ❖ Physical health and well-being: *"Is healthy, rested and well nourished."*
- ❖ Social-emotional domain: *"Is confident and feels good about self"* and *"Gets along well with others."*
- ❖ School-related behaviors and skills: *"Can follow directions, rules and routines"* and *"Is respectful of others."*
- ❖ Communication skills: *Is able to verbally express needs, wants and feelings"* and *"Enjoys listening to stories and books."*
- ❖ Self-help skills: *"Is able to care for personal needs."*
- ❖ Approaches to learning: *"Is enthusiastic and curious in approaching new situations."*

Child readiness characteristics in language development, motor development, cognitive development, and

general knowledge domains were viewed as less critical to success in kindergarten. Physical health and wellbeing was the category seen as the most important and essential readiness characteristic by all survey respondents. This finding has strong implications for private and public agencies and their policies, such as access to vision, hearing, and dental screening; child immunization efforts; and nutrition and health education programs, to name a few.

There were also areas of consistency across the findings of both studies as to school actions and practices that support children's readiness for success. In general, participants felt that schools and teachers can best assist young children to be successful in school in the following ways:

- ❖ by demonstrating care and support for emotional wellbeing,
- ❖ by establishing positive home-school relationships through communication and transition activities, and
- ❖ by providing curriculum practices that emphasize active, individualized, and developmentally appropriate learning experiences for young children.

At present, there is little information on the extent to which these practices are employed in Hawai'i, which suggests the need for a formal, systemic infrastructure to gather, evaluate, and make such information accessible.

Some patterns of difference among the groups of parents, teachers, and administrators emerged from the research. Overall, preschool teachers emphasized the importance of the social-emotional development of children, the value of a child-centered curriculum, and the significance of the transition from preschool to kindergarten. Of greater importance to kindergarten teachers were school-related behaviors like following routines and directions, paying attention, demonstrating common courtesies, and exhibiting self-control in groups; school policies that support readiness such as attendance, health, and discipline; and staffing and structure issues such as lower student-teacher ratios in order to better meet the needs of individual children. These differences may reflect the increasing pressures on elementary school teachers, in contrast to preschool teachers, to raise the achievement levels and test scores of their students. However, it is clear that these differences may well be important to address if the goal of strengthening ties between preschools and elementary schools is critical in providing more coordinated learning experiences for children.

In general, parent groups valued general knowledge (knows colors, shapes, letters, numbers) and an active, hands-on, and individualized curriculum more than teacher and administrator groups, who placed greater emphasis on seat work, work books, and daily homework. Kindergarten parents felt strongly that parent-school communication and parent education would assist children's success in kindergarten.

Administrators placed significantly less emphasis on school related behaviors and language and communication skills than did the parent and teacher groups. They also saw social and emotional development as less critical to kindergarten success than did parents. In selecting the five child-readiness items most critical to school success, administrators valued "*Is enthusiastic and curious in approaching new activities,*" and "*Is healthy, rested and well nourished,*" more than teachers and parents. Some of these differences may point to areas where greater communication between administrators, parents, and teachers is needed in order to develop greater shared understanding about readiness for school success.

In comparison with the national studies reported upon (NCES 1993a, 1993b, 1995), the three survey items with the highest ratings were the same for Hawai'i and national parents and teachers: *Takes turns and shares* (social-emotional); *Uses words to make needs and thoughts known* (language and communication); and *Is enthusiastic and curious in approaching new activities* (dispositions toward learning). Whereas the national surveys found that preschool parents valued school-related behaviors and academic skills more than kindergarten teachers, this was not the case in Hawai'i. Here, these two role groups were more similar to one another in their high ratings of all areas of child readiness. Such strong levels of agreement can give some direction to readiness efforts and initiatives in the state. However, these high endorsements raise the issue of expectations for young children. From these findings, young children entering kindergarten are expected to have a wide array of well-developed skills and knowledge in order to be successful in school. Questions arise as to whether such high expectations are reasonable and developmentally appropriate for young children. As Piotrkowski et al. (2001) have argued, these findings may also reflect the concerns of parents and teachers regarding the potential for kindergarten success in Hawai'i's relatively resource-poor schools.

The findings from this study, the national studies, and other readiness research indicate that parents, teachers, and

administrators generally consider social-emotional development, language and communication, dispositions toward learning, physical health and well being, and school-related behaviors more important to readiness for school success than basic knowledge and academic skills. Although knowing one's colors, knowing the alphabet, and knowing how to count have been recognized as important characteristics of readiness, particularly by parent groups; learning and development in other domains has frequently been seen as equally, or even more, important. These results suggest that children who are healthy and can get along with others, who can communicate their wants and needs, and who are self-regulating in the school environment have the necessary foundation for academic learning. Thus, an existing tension is apparent in light of current pressures from the No Child Left Behind federal legislation to increase academic achievement in preschool and kindergarten education, perhaps at the expense of other learning objectives and development important to school success.

Value of the research

Early childhood efforts in Hawai'i have been informed and enhanced by the areas of consensus that the study identified. What we learned about the views of readiness held by parents, teachers, and school administrators helped us to develop a set of recommendations for public policy related to school readiness in Hawaii and a proposed state definition of readiness. A slightly revised version of this definition of school readiness became law on April 8, 2002. The law views school readiness as involving both shared responsibility and accountability. It states, "Young children are ready to have successful learning experiences in school when there is a positive interaction of the child's developmental characteristics, school practices, and family and community support." Having a common and shared definition of readiness has the potential of serving as a central focus around which the early childhood community can organize its efforts. It can guide its expenditure of energy and resources; give sustaining purpose for public and private partnerships; and, most importantly, create a context that will enable children to succeed in kindergarten and their later school experiences.

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